

Newscasters from Nowhere

Decoding the lack of linguistic variation in news broadcasting.



Image from <https://money.cnn.com/video/media/2015/09/04/anchor-spanish-pronunciation.cnnmoney/>

by [Leah Metzger](#) on May 14th, 2019

The United States is rich with linguistic diversity. While the population speaks a total of 350 different languages,¹ its English-speaking inhabitants alone employ a dizzying array of different dialects, varying with the region, race, class, gender, and age of the speakers.²

New Yorkers famously drop their r's after vowels, southerners pronounce "pin" and "pen" as if they were the same word, and Philadelphians say "wooder" instead of

¹ Juan Castillo, "At Least 350 Languages Spoken In US Homes: New Report," CNBC, November 04, 2015, <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/11/04/at-least-350-languages-spoken-in-us-homes-new-report.html>.

² Chenjerai Kumanyika, "Vocal Color in Public Radio," Transom, July 22, 2016, <https://transom.org/2015/chenjerai-kumanyika/>.

“water.”³ Many black Americans employ features of African American English such as negative inversion --“nobody liked it” becomes “didn’t nobody like it,”⁴-- and many speakers of Mexican ethnic origin in the Southeast speak Chicano English, using vowel sounds closer to their Spanish equivalents.⁵ Additionally, many of the 66.6 million Americans who speak a language other than English at home have a foreign accent.⁶

So, when we hear someone speak, we’re often able to infer a lot about their identity. There are some speakers, however, whose variety of English seems to reveal very little about them. These people include news anchors, radio hosts, and weather forecasters on television, and they speak in a way that many people label “neutral” and “accentless.” To get a job as a newscaster, explains Amy Caples, a former news anchor and professor at the broadcasting program at Temple University, “you have to sound literally like you're from nowhere.”⁷

How do these newscasters go about sounding like they are from “nowhere,” their speech free of regionalisms or other markers of identity? According to linguists such as Rosina Lippi-Green and Marcos Rohena-Madrado, the answer lies in using a dialect of English called General American English (also often referred to as Standard American English),⁸ a prestige variety based on the speech of white, upper-middle class, educated speakers from the midwest.⁹

“General American English is a very fuzzy concept because it really is what it is not,” explains Rohena-Madrado, a professor of Spanish and Linguistics at Middlebury College. “It is not Southern American English. It is not New York City English. It is not Southern California, surfer-dude English.” While listeners might associate non-standard varieties such as these with an array of problematic, regional or racial stereotypes --think New York accents associated with rudeness, Southern accents associated with rurality, or African American English associated with lack of

³ Matthew J.X. Malady, “This Is the Most Linguistically Fascinating State in the Country,” *Slate Magazine*, December 14, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2014/04/pennsylvania_dialects_from_pittsburghese_to_philadelphia_speak_the_keystone.html.

⁴ Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 189.

⁵ Carmen Fought, “Talking with Mi Gente,” PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/chicano/>.

⁶ Karen Zeigler and Steven Camarota, “Almost Half Speak a Foreign Language in America's Largest Cities,” CIS.org, September 19, 2018, <https://cis.org/Report/Almost-Half-Speak-Foreign-Language-Americas-Largest-Cities>.

⁷ Natalie Wolchover, “Why Do News Anchors All Talk the Same?” *NBCNews.com*, October 01, 2011, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44740700/ns/technology_and_science-science/t/why-do-news-anchors-all-talk-same/#.XNLCMnd96u5.

⁸ Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 57, 60.

⁹ Gene Demby et al., “Code Switch: Talk American,” *NPR*, August 08, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=636442508>.

education-- they tend to have fewer negative associations surrounding this white, educated, midwestern dialect.¹⁰ This lack of baggage makes it a good option for newscasters who want to emit a sense of neutrality, credibility and authority, leading to its prominent use in media which has in turn given way to its dominance.

Thus, General American English is not free of regional origin, nor do its speakers lack an accent. "This just happens to be the accent that is most prominent and is the hegemonic one, so nobody thinks of it as deviating from the norm," Rohena-Madrado explains, "even though it probably is very different from the way that a lot of people speak everyday."

While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the use of General American English among newscasters, it is its near-exclusive use that has become problematic. This ubiquity has created what Rohena-Madrado calls an "unspoken standard," making the use of any other variety --any non-white, non-upper-middle class variety-- sound inappropriate on the news.

This linguistic norm can have troubling consequences for newscasters who speak a different variety of English. Deion Broxton, a black reporter from Baltimore, told NPR's Gene Demby that he struggled to find a job in news broadcasting because of the way he speaks.¹¹

"A few months ago," he explained, "I had a really promising lead for a job." The news director was impressed with Broxton and his resume, but told him that he was concerned about his accent. "Ultimately, I didn't get the job."¹²

Broxton is not alone: many other reporters have also been denied jobs or airtime based on their speech. Brazilian news editor and reporter Gisele Regatao recorded a story on a Brazilian artist and submitted it to National Public Radio, only to find out that it wouldn't air, in part because of her accent.¹³

"I was shocked," Regatao wrote in an article for the Columbia Journalism Review. Not only did she know her accent was easy to understand; she also had expected NPR to embrace the idea of a piece on a Brazilian artist reported by a Brazilian journalist. She realized, however, that within the world of American news media, "virtually no anchors speak with accents from non-English speaking countries."¹⁴

¹⁰ Demby et al., "Code Switch."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gisele Regatao, "The Many Voices of Journalism," Columbia Journalism Review, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/journalism-accent-radio.php.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The few newscasters who do speak with accents or use different pronunciations face numerous challenges. Viewers voiced their discontent when local Arizona news anchor Vanessa Ruiz pronounced Spanish-derived words using Spanish phonology,¹⁵ and Puerto Rican broadcast journalist Javier Gomez never applied for on-air jobs at major English-language networks because he assumed his accent wouldn't make the cut.¹⁶

These instances go beyond the scope of Broxton, Regatao, Ruiz, and Gomez's careers; they're reflective of a greater issue of exclusion. When news agencies limit on-air opportunities to speakers of the dominant variety of English, they exclude voices from non-dominant groups. It makes it less likely that we'll hear stories about and reported by immigrants, racial minorities, and people from less privileged backgrounds. Broxton, for example, originally entered the field of journalism because he wanted to report on issues that affect the black, Baltimorean community, like the death of Freddie Gray and other instances of police brutality.¹⁷ Without an on-air broadcasting job, Broxton can't share his perspective.

Many news agencies, like the one that turned down Broxton, suggest that newscasters who speak other varieties of English resolve the issue by simply "working on their accents," mastering the elements of the General American dialect.¹⁸

"It's very unfair to ask that of anybody," remarked Rohena-Madrado. For some, like Regatao, it may be asking for the impossible: most speakers who learn an additional language after puberty will never be able to speak it with native-like pronunciation.¹⁹ While other speakers are indeed able to learn to produce the speech patterns of General American English, it can be an arduous, expensive process. Regardless, some newscasters feel like it's their only option. Broxton drove 45 minutes from Baltimore to the suburbs of D.C. each week to meet with a speech pathologist, essentially "trying not to sound like a black man from Baltimore."²⁰ Other newscasters, like Gomez, have reservations about giving into the pressure to "fix" their speech. "I felt like losing my accent was losing myself," he says.²¹

¹⁵ Armando Tinoco, "Vanessa Ruiz Accent: News Anchor Criticized Over Pronunciation, Fires Back At Detractors [VIDEO]," *Latin Times*, September 04, 2015, <https://www.latintimes.com/vanessa-ruiz-accent-news-anchor-criticized-over-pronunciation-fires-back-detractors-338293>.

¹⁶ Regatao, "The Many Voices of Journalism."

¹⁷ Demby et al., "Code Switch."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Why We Speak With Foreign Accents," *Brainscape Blog*, November 04, 2015, <https://www.brainscape.com/blog/2012/03/why-foreign-accents/>.

²⁰ Demby et al., "Code Switch."

²¹ Regatao, "The Many Voices of Journalism."

Indeed, accents are closely linked to identity. Many linguists agree that asking someone to change the way they speak is highly discriminatory, akin to asking them to change who they are. Rohena-Madrado points out that when news agencies tell people like Broxton that their accent is not fit for the job, they are implicitly expressing, “I don’t want a black newscaster -- or a newscaster that *sounds* black.” Speech therapy courses designed to help people conform to the linguistic norm only perpetuate the discrimination.

How can we break this cycle of reinforcing a linguistic norm and excluding voices that stray from it? Rohena-Madrado argues that it will be a difficult, unfair process. As illustrated by Regatao and Ruiz’s experiences, newscasters who speak authentically are bound to be targets of criticism. “It’s a tough position to put somebody in,” he explains, “particularly if that somebody is probably going to be of an underrepresented background.” Okim Kang, a professor of Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University, echoes this sentiment, arguing that it’s wrong to put the onus on the speaker to resolve these issues. Instead, she’s working on finding ways to train listeners to understand and respect the fact that accents form an important part of speakers’ identities. “We all have them,” she points out, “and we all have to make a real effort to listen and understand.”²²

So far, however, most of the efforts to make newscasting more inclusive have come from non-standard speakers themselves. After receiving criticism for her pronunciation, Ruiz stood her ground, addressing her viewers on-air. “Some of you have noticed that I pronounce a couple of things maybe a little bit differently than what you’re used to,” she told them. “I know that change can be difficult, but it’s normal, and over time, I know that everything falls into place.”²³

Others have taken to alternative mediums to confront the issue. Chenjerai Kumanyika, a public radio reporter and professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, created a multimedia voice-and-text manifesto describing his experience grappling with “his own voice [and] his own identity in the role of a public radio reporter.”²⁴ Regatao recounted her experience with NPR in a written piece called “The Many Voices of Journalism” where she argued for the inclusion of a more diverse array of voices in news broadcasting.²⁵

²² Demby et al., “Code Switch.”

²³ Tinoco, “Vanessa Ruiz Accent.”

²⁴ Kumanyika, “Vocal Color in Public Radio.”

²⁵ Regatao, “The Many Voices of Journalism.”

“Accents are an important part of representation,” she writes. “Ultimately, they reflect who belongs and who doesn’t—and what the voice of our country sounds like.”²⁶

The lack of linguistic variation in news broadcasting is no coincidence. It’s a product of a discriminatory cycle where some identities --generally upper-middle class, educated, white identities-- are held above others. As Regatao writes, it’s time that a wider range of voices are broadcast and heard.

²⁶ Ibid.